

## Parenting in a Cross-Cultural Setting

"We're going to Botswana!" Jim and Judy have accepted an MCC assignment. Their next few months are crammed with activity as they pack and say their farewells. They're excited and upbeat at orientation, where they learn the importance of knowing the local language and are inundated with development theory. Tired, but gung ho, they arrive in Botswana, ready to start their work.

But, whoa... Suddenly their children's needs loom up, threatening to take over Judy's time especially, since, as the primary homemaker, her assignment is flexible. Judy discovers that her children are lonely and homesick. They can't communicate; doing school work is almost impossible. They are afraid to go out on their own after an unfortunate incident in which some village boys called them names and threw rocks. It's obvious they'll never make it through the three-hour worship services; Jim and Judy had envisioned local church participation as the cornerstone of their community involvement. Childcare is not nearly as available as Jim and Judy thought it would be. Judy is torn between her desire to serve her neighbors and her need to keep her family happy and functioning.

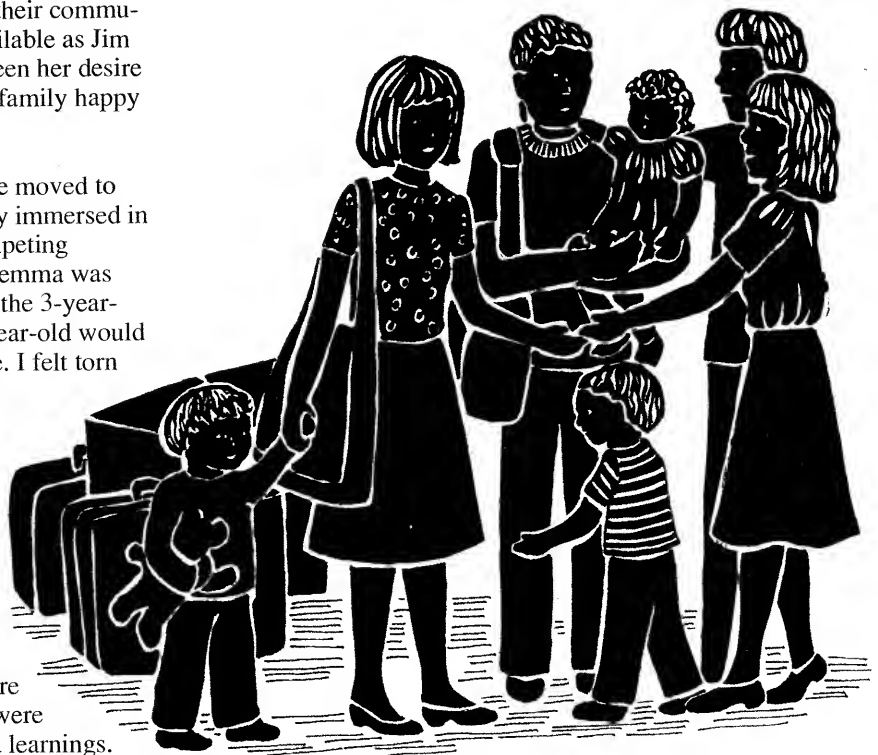
Judy's experience was essentially mine when we moved to Mexico three years ago. With Mark immediately immersed in work, I was left to untangle the dilemma of competing responsibilities, expectations and needs. The dilemma was very tangible. Attending a community meeting, the 3-year-old would pull on me to play with him. The 7-year-old would whine that he was bored and wanted to go home. I felt torn and guilty.

The experience awakened my curiosity. Were other MCC parents facing similar predicaments? Could we learn from one another, support one another? This *Report* issue arose from the desire to find out. In the summer of 1990, letters and questionnaires were sent to 66 MCC parents on assignment. Over the next months, 39 replies (34 women; 5 men) were received from around the world. The replies were insightful, often eloquent, and the respondents were enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and learnings.

Because this *Report* is based on survey replies, it does not follow the usual format. Instead, many persons' input have gone into each section, which cover practical topics for families embarking upon a cross-cultural adventure. The goal is to provide useful ideas and advice to parents anticipating service and to friends, relatives and colleagues who want to support the family.

Some general findings about today's MCC parents bear mentioning. The woes of being an MK (missionary kid), as described in such books as *Letters Never Sent* by Ruth E. Van Reken and personally experienced by many of today's MCC parents, are not being replayed in today's MCC families. In the past, missionary couples often viewed their church work as their foremost priority. Their children were sometimes made to feel, as MCC's Director of Personnel Services Bill Loewen puts it, "involuntary servants of God." MKs often did not feel free to express negative feelings since their parents were doing "God's work."

Today's MCC parents have dual priorities. They want to provide meaningful, dedicated service without sacrificing family life. Today's MCC parents also want their children



actively engaged in the cross-cultural experience. They are apt to send their children to local, rather than boarding schools. Because such schools instruct in the native language and academic standards are often low, parents need to be available to help their children academically.

These priorities can contribute to high parental stress levels, especially if the difficulties are not anticipated and thought out in advance.

Some *Report* readers may wonder at the omission of such worrisome concerns as health care and nutrition. The survey showed them not to be of critical concern. Although many MCC families live in areas lacking adequate health care and they worry about the "what if's", most have not had serious health problems or have located adequate care when needed. Those with special medical needs plan for them in advance. Regarding food, the theme was repetitive: "The variety isn't great but our diets are healthier than ever. We just feel guilty that we can afford an adequate diet when our neighbors can not."

I hope this issue focusing on families will not be taken as a belittlement of the unique struggles of single MCC volunteers. I also apologize that this issue does not deal adequately with the concerns of single-parenting in a cross-cultural setting or with parents who leave older children at home. As Gladys Block, Jamaica, put it, "How does one parent young adult children from a distance of 4,000 miles?"

Finally, the survey and this issue of *Report* focus on possible difficulties that may be faced by families with children overseas, with the goal of helping families avoid problems. There is not room to talk in as great a detail about the very real joys of life overseas with children.

I regret that I did not find time to pen personal thank you's to the many MCCers who took time and effort to respond for this issue. Many months later and in this public format, I want to thank those who found the time to share, thus helping others jump hurdles they've already vaulted.

—Emily Will

**Emily Will, compiler, was editor of *Women's Concerns Report* from 1984-1988. Since that time she, her husband Mark, and two children, Peter and Jason, have been MCCers in Mexico. Earlier they served with MCC in Jamaica.**

## Packing Up

Elisabeth, then 4, calmly told friends we were moving to "Oblivia". She seemed fine with the plan, as long as she'd be with us. Eva, then 6, wanted nothing to do with the idea of moving; she soon admitted that her greatest fear was learning Spanish.

Perhaps some would say that we should not have made the decision to come until she was fully in agreement; we did not. We agreed with her that language learning would have its scary and frustrating moments but we were all going to give it a try.

We reassured Eva that although there would be very uncomfortable, frustrating times in a Bolivian school, we would not push her to the point of despair. We hoped we would have the wisdom to recognize that point! I am glad we kept 'nudging' the children as we did, talking about fears but pressing on. —Sara King, MCC Bolivia

No parents surveyed allowed pre-teen children an active say in whether or not to accept an assignment, although they kept their children's interests and needs in mind. Once the decision was made, they listened to their fears and tried to reassure them. They dwelt on the positive and encouraged their children to look upon the move as an adventure.

As Cookie Wiebe, Chad, put it, "Our 11-year-old was never given veto power but we made clear to her that all her feelings were acceptable and understandable." Karen Metzler, Burkina Faso, stated, "We assured our children, then ages 10 and 8, that if there were important reasons (health, schooling problems) for terminating early, we would do so..."

Families with teenagers, however, generally did allow the children a "yea or nay." "We would not have taken the assignment if our daughter had not been ready to try it," said Janet Reedy, Vietnam.

Following are some of the activities parents did before assignments to facilitate their children's adjustment, both letting loose of the old and energizing for the new:

## Share your ideas

MCC Personnel Services is compiling a folder of information and ideas on "Parenting in Cross-Cultural Settings," that will be available to new MCCers during orientation. If you have ideas and thoughts to share on any aspect of cross-cultural parenting, we invite you to send those to: Melody Rupley, Personnel Development, MCC, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501.



- A couple years before assignment, family spent several months in region
- Helped child write letter with her questions to country representative
- Studied maps
- Ate at restaurant featuring new country's food
- Gave children some priority time or "first energy" during pack up, stopping to play ball, talk, read, etc.
- Gave son four boxes for toys, marked "take," "give away," "sell," and "store"
- Allowed child to bank earnings from his toys sold at yard sale

Despite the many activities, several parents echoed Janet Reedy's comment, "None of us really had a very good grasp of the situation until we got there." Cookie Wiebe remarked, "We didn't expect those first two months to be so hard on her. We thought she was fairly well prepared and, emotionally, I think she was—prepared for doing without, etc. but not for building cross-cultural relationships."

Mary Yoder Holsopple, co-country representative for Swaziland and Mozambique, also pointed to the importance of other people's opinions during the packing-up period. An influential person put a bug in their young son's ears to the effect that his parents were dragging him along to Africa.

"How people around the family unit react to and support the decision is crucial to how the family will survive the horrors of pre-assignment transition and early adjustment to the new place. Negative comments and attitudes will be heard and deeply felt by the little ones. This 'other support' is so vital because it is during this time that even the most confident parents have moments of doubt and question whether or not this was a good decision," Yoder Holsopple said.

Kudos to country representatives who wrote personal letters to new children, telling them of playhouses in their backyard or nearby mountains to climb, and to the children's orientation personnel!•

- Hosted international visitors
- Studied or "played with" the new language
- Read books or viewed videos about the country and read children's stories set in cross-cultural settings
- Used a marriage encounter technique called dialogue, in which family members wrote letters to each other sharing feelings on specific questions, such as "How do I feel about leaving grandpa and grandma?"
- Helped child give class presentation on country to which going
- Viewed slides from former assignments or from other MCCers
- Let children stay with grandparents during hectic final "wrap-up" days
- Allowed children to take along elements of "home" as symbols of stability—favorite toys, stuffed animals, etc.
- Organized a good-bye party for each child with his or her friends
- Sent child to bilingual school a half year before departure
- Used General Conference's "Neighbors Near and Far" packet on area to which heading

## Settling In

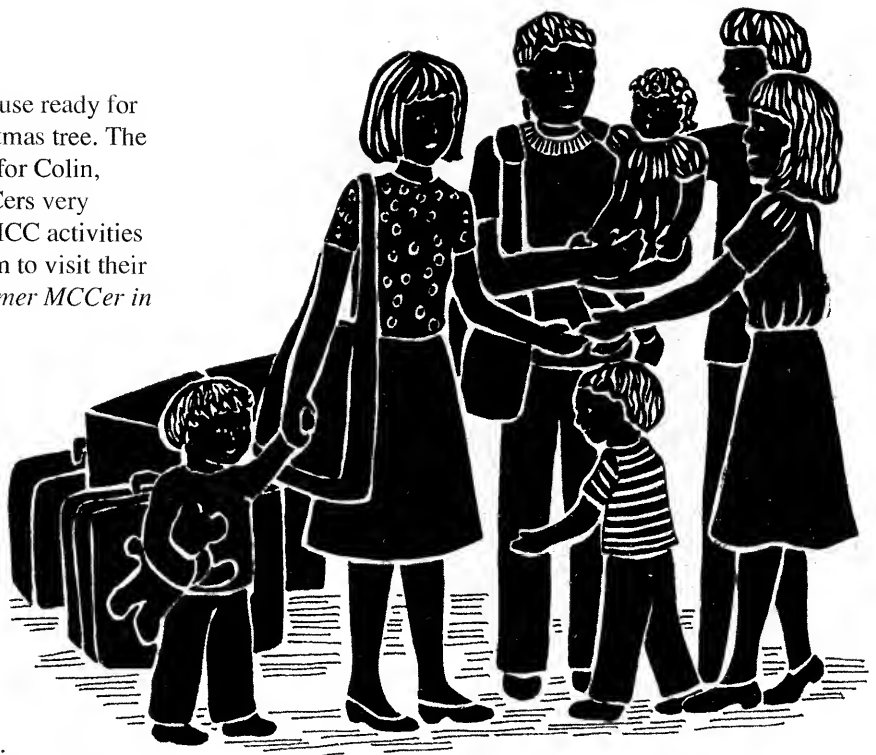
They (former country reps) had our house ready for us to move into—complete with Christmas tree. The next day MCCers had a birthday cake for Colin, whose birthday is Dec. 21. Some MCCers very deliberately included our children in MCC activities during those first few days, taking them to visit their new school, etc. —*Melody Rupley, former MCCer in Burkina Faso*

While the Rupleys' arrival in Burkina Faso was very positive, our family's first day in Mexico was perhaps more typical of most MCCers' experience. After a tiring day of travel, we agreed to tour our new community. Afterwards we agreed to a late evening meal at a Mexican restaurant. The strange food was the last straw for our exhausted children; they were distraught and crying for home as we tried to settle them into bed that night.

The first few days in the new environment are especially important since they help set the tone. When everything is new and strange, a relaxed schedule becomes important. More "down time," more family time, were frequent comments about what would have been helpful during the first days and weeks in the country.

The arrival in country does not necessarily signal "settling down." There may be weeks or months of transitional activities—language study or village live-in—before the family actually sets up its own housekeeping. It's best to think through *beforehand* what will happen with the children during this period. I shudder now to recall that we bused our 3-year-old off to a day camp at a school we or he hadn't even seen during our first month of language study. He survived, but with more forethought and assertiveness on our part, we likely could have arranged a less traumatic transition.

Families arriving in countries with more established programs where other families have "gone through the ropes" generally report positive first-days experiences:



"On our arrival in Brazil, one of the most helpful things others did was to introduce their children to ours. Several families met us at the airport and the next day, a family took us on a short outing. This was very helpful because our children realized there were other children here with whom they could relate," reported Evelyn Koop.

"While we were in language school," recalled Carolyn Albrecht, Bolivia, "other MCCers and mission folk provided child care and made our kids welcome. I especially appreciate the time some single MCCers took to get to know the kids."

A more difficult transition was described by Loretta Payne: "Upon arrival in Bangladesh, I soon realized there was no support for us. Of the 30-35 MCCers, two couples had children; neither lived in our area. MCCers here work constantly and the whole lifestyle is geared toward single living. A very active 1-year-old was an immediate shock to the MCC community. It's possible that others, especially the



### Playtime

Following is a listing of playtime items most frequently recommended by MCC parents:

- Books, books, more books!
- Craft materials—paints, clay, crayons, etc.—and idea books
- Cassette tapes of stories and music
- LEGO
- Puzzles and favorite table games
- Balls
- Children's magazines
- Dolls
- Cars and trucks of medium and matchbox size
- Pets (acquired on site!)
- Sandbox

## Children: Slowing Us Down, Speeding Us Up

men, were also a bit confused about a single mother coming to the Third World. No one ever asked me about the circumstances. We also came at a time of transition; many old-timers were about to leave and didn't have time for newcomers." Payne's experience likely would have been different in a country such as Bolivia, where the large MCC program consists of numerous families with children.

Mary Yoder Holsopple, Swaziland, emphasized the importance of seeing one's new house before taking off for language study or live-in: "We were exhausted. We had already been uprooted for a couple of months (leadership seminar, good-byes, etc.). It would have been good to go directly to our new home to sleep, unpack and feel settled. Instead we spent two nights in a cold conference center down the hill and then went off to our homestead live-in for two months feeling beleaguered and unorganized."

The transitional period, from the time the decision to go is made to six months after arrival, is the most difficult time, Yoder Holsopple believes. "In my opinion this is the time when families need the most help and support. Keeping this period as short as possible would be helpful. Staying on a schedule (for eating, sleeping, playing) appropriate and conducive to the children's needs is extremely important. Having parental time and attention is also important."

Providing this security and normalcy represents an enormous challenge to parents deluged with demands to learn, see, etc. during the first days and weeks, especially if there is a limited overlap period with the predecessors. •

During our first year my husband and I have had four major roles: (1) taking care of family needs and helping our children through their adjustment process; (2) home schooling; (3) language study—local village language and also French; (4) our MCC project assignments. Because all these roles have been important, we've tried to do them all well. I believe we've tried to do too much! I am finding that meeting my children's needs (including home schooling) is all I can really handle. But I came with the expectation that I'd learn two languages and do a good job with the health education program. I spent this last year trying to do all four of my "jobs" well and usually felt none of them were being done well enough.

Orientation focused on the importance of language acquisition, relationships with village neighbors, etc. I've had to work through a lot of guilt feelings. If I give my time to caring for and teaching my family, then language study and program work suffers. If I put more time into program and language study, then my family suffers." —Karen Metzler, MCC, Burkina Faso

Nearly every respondent reported conflict between family and work. Such conflicts are likely heightened in MCC assignments for reasons such as the following: (1) Family members turn to one another for support, entertainment, etc. when surrounded by the unfamiliar; (2) Living conditions are often more rustic, requiring more time to maintain a household; and (3) Hours, space and responsibilities dividing "home" and "work" are not so clearly compartmentalized as they are in a typical 9-to-5 job.

"We are four people living in a one-room hut," wrote Harvey Harman, South Africa. "We spend a lot of time on daily maintenance—carrying water, cooking, handwashing clothes, etc. Sometimes it seems we have little time for anything other than basic survival. Limited space and so much time on maintenance needs is a constant stress."



As a man who strives to share childcare equally with his wife, Harman feels an additional stress: "I am not free to be gone from home all day like most men here in the village. Other men do not always seem to understand why I am not free to participate in a certain spontaneous activity, such as attend a meeting I just found out about."

New parents, especially, are often dismayed by the tensions of parenting and program participation. "We were rather overwhelmed with childcare initially," wrote Irene Morrow, former MCCer in El Salvador. "Nathan had colic and cried constantly the first three months. We lived in a small house without running water; David had to carry water several blocks twice a day for our use. We washed diapers by hand, did all the housework, etc., and tried to continue outside activities. I really did nothing else except care for Nathan, do housework and go to church for the first three months. I felt very isolated and depressed. Looking back at the experience, I would definitely try to have more household help if I were to do it again in such an isolated assignment."

Ruth Kiedel Clemens, Cambodia, reported similar reactions when their two infants consumed much of her time and energies. Fortunately, as co-country representative in an urban setting, she was able to initiate some positive changes: "We moved my desk home and have gotten another computer that I can use at home. This has made a big difference in how

much I can contribute to the work of the office and how useful I can feel." She has also come to view this period of her life as "a season of time" that won't last forever.

Despite the conflict between parenting and projects, respondents described numerous positive aspects of having children. Without a doubt, children open doors to cross-cultural friendship and understanding.

As Irene Morrow put it, "Having children has given us something in common with Salvadoran culture. It has been a point of making relationships and identifying more with people's lives here. I have gained more understanding of women's struggles, needs, fears, concerns and hopes. In general, people seemed to open up more after we had a child."

Joanne Koopmans, Indonesia, reported that she and her husband "followed on their children's heels" in forming relationships with neighbors. "The villagers claimed our children as their own, of which both they and we are proud."

Having children also tends to bring out empathy, an important asset in cross-cultural situations. Don Peters, Brazil, stated it well: "I truly believe having children has helped me be more gentle, more considerate, more flexible. So, in short, while the children slow us down, they speed us up in many other ways."

Having children forces parents to be organized, maintain routines and, as Evelyn Koop, Brazil, pointed out, "establish a home atmosphere, which can be shared with others, including fellow MCCers who may need a 'home' from time to time. We all benefit: others who need a 'family,' our children who need the sense of a larger family group and we as parents who enjoy others' fellowship."

Then there are those lucky few parents whose children actually lighten their housework load. Cookie and David Wiebe's 11-year-old daughter is so helpful with household chores that they feel free to hop on their motorbikes and visit their Chadian neighbors!\*

## Saying Thank You in Setswana

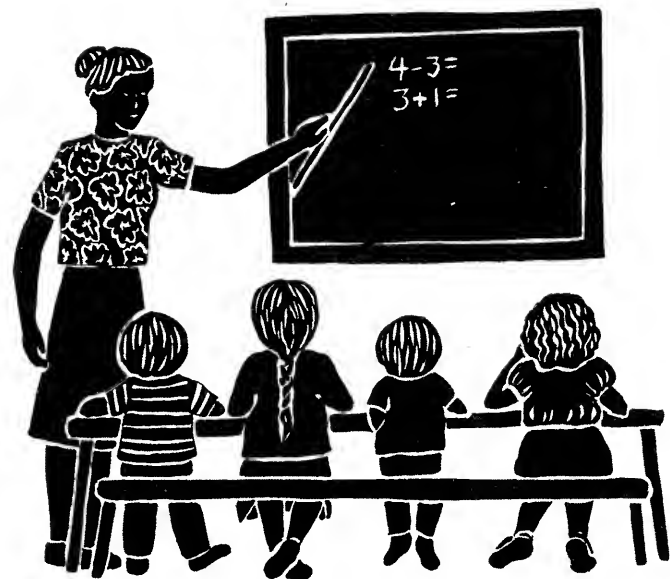
Our children haven't learned much Sesotho over the past three years. We came with the assumption that they would just learn and so brought no tools with us on how to help children learn a second language. Perhaps children do naturally learn language in certain settings, but not in an urban setting in a country whose second official language is English. Our children seek out the Basotho (and expatriate) children who speak the best English and ignore the others. —*Dave Neufeld, MCC Lesotho*

Conventional wisdom has it that children effortlessly assimilate foreign languages. Some do. But if the respondents to this survey are representative, many children struggle with a second language.

Various factors are involved in the ease with which language is acquired. Important among them are the degree to which the second language *must* be learned for meaningful interaction, and the child's personality and natural abilities. Respondents frequently mentioned age as a factor—but almost always when speaking in generalities about children rather than about their own. Neufeld's children, for example, are under age 6. While a number of parents did report that their young children soaked up the new language—and even became their translators—equal numbers reported frustrations.

Within any one family, some children may pick up on language quicker and easier than others. "Two of our children learned French easily at school and didn't find the experience traumatic but the third (who has trouble spelling in English!) found it very difficult and extremely stressful," reported Melody Rupley, former Burkina Faso.

Parents are often eager for their children to become fluent. As Paula Kuhns, Mexico, pointed out, "Having a monolingual child is not very acceptable or understood by locals." Neighbors are often thrilled when a North American child learns their language. Parents, desirous for this acceptance and perhaps worried about their child's school performance,



may feel inclined to "push" their child to learn the language. They later discover that the child learns when he or she has to or feels ready.

"I'm glad now for the times I bit my tongue and sorry for the pressure I'm sure they all felt from me at the beginning," said Carolyn Albrecht, Bolivia.

In the same vein, LaVerna Reimer, Germany, advises parents to "take time, more time and still more time" in easing a child into new situations in which a foreign tongue is spoken. She reported her preschooler was quite anxious for about six months in a "totally German environment in which he couldn't understand a word being spoken" and that he "would often disappear into his room" at such times. "When we eased him into nursery school," Reimer related, "he learned German on his own when he was ready."

Many MCCers, particularly those in African countries, reported that because English is an official language or is widely known, their children do not learn the local dialect rapidly. Eleanor and Murray Nash lived in a small Nigerian town, amid mud hut compounds, but none of their three children became fluent in Hausa. "With English as the official language and all students learning it, maybe our kids quickly perceived learning Hausa was not vitally important. The neighbor children were very happy to practice their English during play," Eleanor wrote.

Parents whose children do become fluent in a second language are thrilled and proud. "It's great to hear Jessica (age 3) talking with her friends. She just takes a big breath and starts jabbering away," said Cindy Kane, Bolivia.

And as Don Peters, Brazil, put it, "I'm proud of my children. We adults went to language training for a minimum of three and a half months. The children were thrown into the setting and are surviving."•

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## The Sunday Morning Challenge

Gabri would last from 15 to 45 minutes at church, then was ready to leave. The service was often two to 3 1/2 hours so one of us would leave with Gabri when she was ready. Zairian children in church sit *still* and do not talk, play, squirm. Gabri did all this, so we sometimes got dirty looks. This decreased our satisfaction with and joy out of going to church. — Pam Kirkendall, former MCCer in Zaire

MCC parents were nearly unanimous that “church is an issue.” Further, it is an issue that touches us deeply because our faith is vital to us and we often go to an assignment believing the church will become an important peer and support group.

Almost everywhere, however, church services are lengthy and geared to adults. Even when children understand the language of the service, they do not understand the message. While local children have somehow learned to sit quietly, our North American children are used to being kept happy and entertained. In speaking of their children’s adjustment to church, comments ranged from, “She hates it” to “They have learned to endure.”

Parents deal with the situation in a number of ways. Some have abandoned the idea of attending a local church and opted instead for an international, expatriate church in which the service is more similar to what was known in North America. This option is only available to those living near such churches, usually in large cities.

Other parents alternate going to church, leaving mom home with the kids one week, dad the next. “I wish we could do it differently. Church should be for families,” noted Don Peters, Brazil.

Some parents allow their children to leave the service after an hour or so and play outdoors. Others go prepared to keep their children quiet and happy inside. Reflecting on a previous assignment in Java, Stan Reedy humorously recalled, “Local church services were long and we went in full battle array, armed with cereal, juice, toys, books, the works! I am not sure it was worth it for any of us sometimes



but we did make the effort, and perhaps provided some entertainment when the sermon was boring for other people, too.”

Some parents allow their older children to take along a book to read, “something we don’t like but tolerate,” commented Judy Zimmerman Herr, former MCCer in Botswana. Often the parents stipulate that the reading material must be the Bible or other religious publications.

Some parents become more involved in Sunday school, where this is available. “We’ve purchased some resources and materials for children’s Sunday school that I wouldn’t have thought about if we didn’t have a child in the class,” related Irene Morrow, former MCCer, El Salvador.

Other families, instead of attending church, arrange a service or Sunday school of their own, sometimes with other MCC or expatriate families. While this usually proves satisfactory to the family’s spiritual life, it cuts off a source of interaction, however frustrating it may be at times, with the host culture.

Kathy Fast, Botswana, provided an apt summary to this topic: “Yes, church/Sunday school is an issue. We have found that to be true in all three of our overseas assignments. I don’t think it’s an easy one to get around. Another culture’s emphasis is different and naturally we miss what we’ve grown up with. It’s something each individual has to battle with and find a half-comfortable compromise. Knowing that ahead of time is helpful.”•

**Mennonite Church Rep  
Sought for CWC**

The MCC U.S. Committee on Women's Concerns (CWC) is seeking candidates for the Mennonite Church representative to the committee. We will

give priority to candidates from the East Coast, Central States and West Coast regions of the United States. The CWC is made up of four representatives, one each for Mennonite Church, General Conference, Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ groups.

Members of the U.S. CWC meet twice yearly to help set agenda for the U.S. staff person. For a job description and more information, contact Tina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns Desk, MCC, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501. Responses due by March 15.

## When in France

Many MCCers work in societies where roles and behaviors for men, women and children are more clearly defined and often, especially for women, more limited than they are in North America. MCC families have adopted a range of attitudes and behaviors to either "fit in" or to counter host culture expectations that they view oppressive.

Some couples prefer to stick with traditional male-female roles to minimize differences. As Kathy Fast, Botswana, put it, "Eric and I are basically following much the same roles our parents played. I often find this a bit frustrating, but I think it's helpful to continue in these more traditional roles in that the differences in our roles and the roles men and women play in our host country is not as great."

Melody Rupley, Burkina Faso, related that she and her husband tried to *partially* adapt to cultural expectations: "We found we could accommodate 'little' variations (e.g. women preparing and serving food; men in charge of household money) in order to discuss the larger issues, such as building a marriage on mutual discussion of priorities and roles."

Other MCC couples are opting to share parenting, housework and project work as they see fit, regardless if their choices run counter to host country patterns. Irene Morrow, former MCCer in El Salvador, came to believe that such shared work patterns may say more about us than our projects: "People were shocked that David did women's work (cooked, cleaned, did laundry and childcare, too). But when we left people told us how much they had learned from us—just by watching us as a family. They were impressed that we resolved conflicts without beating our child and that he was polite and displayed manners. It made me think about how important *how* we live is. A major part of our message comes through in our lifestyle and family relationships. I wonder how much people remember from my health classes or Bible studies—but I know what they observed about how we lived and related will stick with them."

As far as dealing with pressures to conform, Mary Yoder Holsopple, Swaziland, offered this nugget: "Laughter is the key to dealing with cultural expectations that are different from our own."

How about expectations for children's behavior? Some MCCers find a greater tolerance for children's behavior than they experienced in North America. Mary Bergen, Thailand, related that they take their preschoolers along with them to restaurants, market, temple and parties. "While we'd worry about protocol and bad manners, we realize that children here are not held accountable at this young age, subsequently, neither are the parents. Lovely!"

This is not the case everywhere, however. Dave Neufeld, Lesotho, offered some poignant testimony: "In Africa it is very important to respect adults (including parents), greet promptly and politely and accept whatever is given you. Our children (and consequently we) have failed this test. They are rude—they hide their hands and faces when strangers hold out their hands in greeting and our oldest has been known to throw food on the floor that she was given but did not like.

"We were not prepared for the teaching and discipline we would have to impose on our children to make them acceptable—or at least less embarrassing. It's too late now. We are a typical North American family with sassy children, and we can't even go to church as a family because of the raucous they create.

"We would have benefitted from someone sitting us down and describing an African family and how the children get trained to be obedient and respectful and have us reflect on how we do or don't train our children to be obedient and respectful *and* creative—and help us to choose our way so that we could be true to the strengths of both.

"For example, we would tell parents to train their children, while still in North America, to accept any food or any dish. To accept it does not mean they have to eat any or all of it. But accept it with thanks they must. If we had been prepared for this, our first weeks would have been much less stressful."•

This issue is the 100th *Women's Concerns Report!* The newsletter was started in August 1973 by the former MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. We plan a 20-year

retrospective issue for 1993, looking at how women's issues have been addressed in the past two decades and what issues lie ahead for Mennonite women.

## Playtime

Scores of kids lived in a small area immediately around our compound, most of them very poor. Though we had very few and very basic toys by our standards, they were objects of awe to the neighbor kids. Any toy taken outside would be quickly destroyed by eager, greedy hands. We quickly established rules that children couldn't come inside. This seems very hardhearted and snobbish, but the reality was that if one came in, 40 or 50 came in! We shared some of our books with neighbor kids on our front porch and these gave a lot of enjoyment (and time to discuss and share ideas). We also shared balls although they were often destroyed or mysteriously disappeared.

—Eleanor Nash, former MCC Nigeria

As parents, we want a happy cross-cultural experience for our kids. We want them to have local friends and to enjoy what the host culture has to offer in the way of entertainment. Sometimes this happens easily and smoothly; our child is "adopted" by the village and spends his or her free time herding cattle and fishing in the river. While this may be the ideal, parents are well advised not to go on an assignment believing that this will be their children's experience.

As I write this, for example, our two boys are happily playing "Junior Monopoly" with a neighbor child. I vividly recall, however, the time our older child physically blocked the bedroom entrance so that his younger brother couldn't enter with a local child. He too often associates their presence with the disappearance of something valuable to him—a Matchbox car, pieces of Lego.

Toys are definitely an issue in MCC children's interaction with local children. MCC families usually have them; neighbor kids usually do not.

Families deal with the toy question in a number of ways. Many allow their children to bring only their closest friends indoors. Large groups play outdoors. "None of the neighborhood parents allow the gang in their homes," noted Paula Kuhns, Mexico. "Inside, the few toys we have appear excessive and distract the children's interaction. It has often been more successful having everyone play outside," said Mary Bergen, Thailand.

Many parents limit the number of toys. "Children can certainly do with a lot fewer toys than we think. Their imagination takes over and it's wonderful to see it develop. They begin to scavenge, play with sticks, tin cans, rope, old mats, bricks, which they convert into anything imaginable," stated Kathy Fast, Botswana, a view echoed by numerous respondents.

It's important, though, to know your child and what he or she is likely going to be able to do without. I doubt, for example, that our older boy would have survived the past three years in this small Mexican town without his fairly extensive Lego collection. He's an introvert who spends hours playing on his own. Our younger child, in contrast, is an extrovert who needs mostly playmates, not toys, to keep him happy.

Another problem that some families encounter is aggressive behavior directed at their children. "What I have found sad is that some children have not accepted ours, to the point of calling them names, throwing rocks, playing mean tricks or at best ignoring them. My children have never been 'disliked' to this extent and it saddens them. Especially my son since it's boys who are doing this. Because of this problem we have constructed a fence, to give our children a zone where they can be safe. We continue to look for creative ways to solve this problem," wrote Marcia Lewandowski, Bolivia.

Experiences of groups of local boys picking on MCC children were reported from various Latin American and African countries. Solutions, as Lewandowski points out, are hard to come by.

Our boys, then 7 and 3, were the butt of inappropriate and aggressive behavior when we first arrived in our Mexican town. Sometimes they joined groups of boys in their play and unwittingly became victims of such "pranks" as having their pants pulled down. Other times, walking to the store, they'd be hit with rocks or pushed down. Now, three years later, they freely move about town on their own and are not bothered. Of course, they no longer join just any group of boys. And we, as parents, have learned to keep close tabs on their comings and goings.

Looking back, we could have avoided much unpleasantness if we had not glibly assumed neighbor boys would play nicely with our children and if we had helped our boys seek out appropriate playmates, perhaps by becoming acquainted with other families.

As Melody Rupley, Burkina Faso, so aptly put it, "The key entertainment for our kids is friends. It's worth a lot of effort,



time and facilitating on the parents' part to help get friendships started and growing. With a friend, a child can do most anything."

Other parents need not worry about mistreatment; they may be concerned about safety and sanitation, however. Pam Kirkendall described her experience: "At first I didn't want Gabri playing at the neighbor's house; it seemed so dirty and unsanitary. But I soon realized that I couldn't keep her away from her friends and that in her own way she was experiencing Zairian culture in a way I couldn't. Granted, she got some cuts in her feet from broken glass in their yard and she got amoebas, but she sure enjoyed herself. One thing I didn't like about the Zairian kids is that they would always give Gabri *everything* she wanted."

Kirkendall's last point is another source of concern for MCC parents; often our children are given differential treatment. Mary Yoder Holsopple recounted that, "When our 6-year-old visits our Swazi 'family' on the homestead, he's treated like a king and plays the part only too well! We try to temper that but not always successfully. When his Swazi 'brothers' visit us, he's the boss because he possesses the resources. We try gently to redirect their play. But sometimes we let them go because we've observed that things tend to work out more equitably when there's no adult interference."

Different issues arise for MCC children whose pals are other expats or from the wealthy classes. "Nearly all expatriate children travel in air-conditioned private cars with darkly tinted windows," wrote Joy Hofer. "We do not have vehicles and so rub shoulders with Filipinos as we bump along in overcrowded jeeps or open-air taxis, and breathe in exhaust fumes, dust and other smells. Although we pride

ourselves at identification with the way most Filipinos live, our children complain at having to live in this kind of 'discomfort' that few of their friends have to bear."

Some MCC children, if given the choice, prefer the company of other expatriate or MCC youngsters. "They love Bolivia and enjoy their friendships here but they identify with the other MCCers much more than with Bolivians," stated Carolyn Albrecht. "At first it bothered me to hear the children set themselves apart from Bolivians. I feel now that it's something they need to do to understand who they are and how they fit here."

Sometimes it's differences in play styles: "Emily, 9, complains that play with Filipino children is boring. She says, 'All they want to do is sit around and talk like ladies,'" related Joy Hofer.

And, sometimes, as Paula Kuhns, Mexico, put it, it's the comfort of similar interests and values: "Though we MCC parents wonder how much our boys should be together before it really hinders their cross-cultural experience, they enjoy the comfort of like interests and common values, etc. I can't blame them in this. It has been a good arrangement as far as Marcos' development in *his* culture."

That's not to say that interaction with other MCC children always goes smoothly. Sometimes a team consists primarily of boys and the MCC girls feel left out. Sometimes it consists of preschoolers and an older child feels friendless at retreats and other get-togethers. And as Gladys Block, Jamaica, stated, "Our children have had great interaction with other MCC children. There have also been frustrations. Values are not necessarily the same even among MCC families."•

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## Support Network

"Letters, letters, letters!" was the overwhelming response of MCCers describing the support they most appreciate from friends, relatives and church back home.

"I don't know if people back home really understand how important and valuable to us are their letters and prayers," said Mary Yoder Holsopple, Swaziland.

A "letter" can be as simple as a note scribbled on a church bulletin. "It's surprising how meaningful those personal notes can be," commented Joy Hofer, Philippines. Respondents lamented that letters tend to taper off the longer they are away.

Children, too, need and appreciate letters. "A letter addressed to a child is a very special thing," noted Don Peters, Brazil. "The absolutely most painful thing for the children was that their *own* friends did not write," recalled Melody Rupley, Burkina Faso.

Children also appreciate occasional small gifts from close friends and relatives. Little treats tucked into letters—Kool Aid, stickers, gum—can brighten a day. While small gifts are appreciated, "getting big boxes of presents has sometimes been a bit overwhelming, even embarrassing," commented Harvey Harman, South Africa.

Most frequently mentioned as appreciated gifts for adults and children alike were magazines and magazine subscriptions, books and music tapes. Some Sunday schools send curriculum and even craft supplies to their overseas members—much appreciated by the recipients. Occasional letters and photos from Sunday school friends are welcomed by MCC children.

How can MCCers in various locations support one another and, especially, MCC children? Mary Yoder Holsopple put it well: "MCC volunteers who take a personal interest in our children, who treat them as important, valuable people, are gems. Our children love them! And they can sense very quickly whether or not someone likes them or is interested in them. Often they demand our attention more when the MCCer doesn't give them any positive attention."



Loretta Payne, single parenting a young child in Bangladesh, would give a hearty amen to that last statement! "The fact that other MCCers here have no time for my child means that I have to meet his every need—as parent, friend, playmate—whenever we get together as a group, as well as all other times. It would be helpful if MCCers would get to know the children (who are also MCCers) and try to understand that they need friendship, understanding and support as much as any adult."

We can also support one another by being tolerant of one another's parenting styles. Perhaps because we presuppose a certain homogeneity among MCCers, we can easily fall into the trap of criticizing or rejecting others for choices different from ours.

Tanya Horat wrote from Burkina Faso, "One thing we have observed among MCCers and other expatriates is lower tolerance for one another's parenting styles than we see for Africans'. Why is it so hard to extend grace, space and tolerance for growth and varying parenting styles in our own culture?"

MCC families can and do support one another in a variety of ways—exchanging childcare; sharing worship times or Sunday school, celebrating special occasions together, visiting one another especially in times of special joy or hardship, trading books, tapes, magazines, and corresponding with one another.

Several suggested a pen pal program among MCC children, an idea awaiting someone's organizational energies!•

**More resources on  
Cross-Cultural Parenting**

Families living overseas sent so much helpful and interesting information, there was not room for all of it in this *Report*. Copies of two additional articles are available on request (write to *Report* editor):

*The ABC'S of Education—Options for children's education overseas*

*How Can MCC Headquarters Support Families?—Suggestions from MCC families to MCC headquarters*

## All in All: Evaluation and Advice

When we sit around the dining room table with a frightened American graduate international studies student and discuss with Jeremy the implications of the coup attempt, as Jeremy ponders the meaning of Philippine sovereignty and the existence of U.S. bases here, and Emily gives a bag of rice to beggar children at the gate, I must believe that our children have learned much about life as it is lived by most of the world's people. That they have grown in a healthy way. And that in the long run they may look back at this experience and be grateful for the years we spent together in the Philippines.

Even now as they talk about the excitement of getting 'home' to the United States and having a car, living in our own house and being able to eat fruit roll-ups again, I tell them how difficult it will be to leave the Philippines. They used to avidly deny the suggestion, but now they sometimes agree. —Joy Hofer, *MCC Philippines*

If MCC parents agree on any one thing, it is that their cross-cultural experience is valuable to both their families' and their children's development. Valuable—but definitely not painless.

Among the positive aspects named, the broadening of horizons was dominant. Children learn to view their own culture as just one of many, each with its own unique strengths and weaknesses. They are exposed firsthand to the harsh realities faced by the world's majority—hunger, poverty, joblessness, etc. They learn that, contrary to North American lifestyles, basic necessities such as water, food, and clothing are not to be taken for granted. "We've come to see how wasteful we were," commented Bev From, Nigeria.

Because of limited material resources, MCC families learn how to make do or improvise, how to solve problems on their own. Children learn how to amuse themselves without many toys, without a local library or sports center. Their creativity is stretched.

Another positive aspect frequently mentioned was increased family cohesiveness. This is due not only to the challenge of making it together in a foreign environment, but also to the fact that most MCC families have more time together. The notable exceptions are country representatives, who reported that one of their greatest stresses was a lack of uninterrupted family time. Many parents are able to integrate their children into their work to some extent—taking them out to the fields, to health classes, etc.—and they view this as a plus.

There are negatives, too, to cross-cultural "gallivanting," as one parent termed it. Mary Yoder Holsopple, Swaziland, calls us the "new-age nomads," always having to say good-bye. Saying good-bye to extended family, particularly to grandparents, was cited as the most difficult aspect of an assignment.

Parents experience pain and difficulty leaving grown children behind. "Even though our oldest daughter was in college and wouldn't have been living with us even if we had remained in the States, we feel the long separations very keenly, at a time when she is making major life decisions and formulating adult values," commented Janet Reedy, Vietnam.

Many also mentioned initial adjustment as a "downer." It's a stressful period—that time between when old roots are yanked up and new ones not yet established—when overwhelmed with a foreign tongue, strange foods, new ways of doing and being.

A disappointment for some parents is the realization that one cannot escape materialism or North American cultural values, even in seemingly remote settings. North American television reaches to the earth's farthest corners, carrying with it values of materialism, individualism and violence. Our child's nursery school teacher in Mexico confided that Jason was trying valiantly to fit in; the problem was that he didn't know the Thundercat cartoon characters!

Marcia Lewandowski, Bolivia, pointed out, "The want of 'things' or 'better things' can be found in any culture. And, of course, what other MCC children have, or get sent, can also be a source of jealousy."

Parents were also asked if they believed the popular wisdom that children adapt relatively effortlessly to new cultures. Most felt this to be false, but they did say the parents' attitudes were crucial to that adjustment.

"Children take about as much time as anyone else to adjust to new cultural settings. They are not as able to articulate their struggle and so it is often not as apparent," wrote Judy Zimmerman Herr, former Botswana. "Probably the most important factor in children's adjustment is parents' attitudes. It is easy to find things to complain about in a new and strange culture, and as parents we have worked hard at not voicing such things in our children's presence." Zimmerman Herr also noted that by carefully listening to children's fears, parents can help them cope and survive.

Stan Reedy, Vietnam, encouraged parents to realize that it is no easier for a child to jump into a culture than it is for an adult. "The interface between cultures is pretty touchy ground; our children are not inherently more resilient than we are. Thinking they are will put unnecessary and dangerous blinders on us as parents. I have seen some parents prodding their children to hug, play with or be friendly to native children—little people with whom they had nothing in common except childhood. We adults can force a certain amount of friendliness, but we inwardly abhor even a small amount of such deceit."

Reedy advises parents to be careful about expectations placed on little ones and to figure out *ahead of time* a graceful way of excusing their small children from things that it becomes clear they don't want to do. He also counsels parents to figure out a way of responding to or even protecting children from any "fawning, cheek-pinching treatment of our children as foreign objects" so it does not become a chronic source of anger for parent or child.

Melody Rupley, Burkina Faso, offered some wise words to parents, wherever they are: "It shouldn't bother us or make us feel guilty that change is probably not painless for kids. Change is unavoidable for all of us. Our job/calling as parents is not to protect our kids from pain, but to help them find ways to learn from, grow through and heal the hurts throughout their lives."•

### Resources/For Further Reading

Lapp, Frances Moore. *What to do After You Turn Off the TV*. New York: Ballantine Books. 1985. Creative, interactive games and activities for the TV-less family.

Rowen, Ruth J. and Samuel F. Rowen. *Sojourners: The Family on the Move. A Book of Resources*. Mich.: Associates of Urbanus. 1990. Series of exercises to be done in family conference to prepare family members, psychologically, for a move to the mission field. Especially helpful for families with older children who can articulate their feelings.

Van Reken, Ruth E. *Letters Never Sent*. Ill.: David C. Cook. 1988. Personal journey of a woman trying to come to terms with her childhood as an MK.



#### Women in Ministry

- **Mary Brenneman** was ordained September 29 at Central Mennonite Church near Fort Wayne, Ind.
- **Brenda North Martin** was ordained for hospital chaplaincy at Raleigh (N.C.) Mennonite Church.
- **Wendy Nelligan** is serving as intern pastor at Killarney Park Mennonite Brethren Church in Vancouver.
- **Susan Ortman Goering** is new co-pastor with her husband, Steve, at Boulder (Colo.) Mennonite Church.
- **Ann and Brad Moyer** are new co-pastors of San Diego Mennonite Fellowship.

#### Book Review:

## A Harvest of Poetry and Visual Images

*Born Giving Birth: Creative Expressions of Mennonite Women*, edited by Mary H. Schertz and Phyllis Martens  
(Faith and Life Press, Newton, Kan., 1991, 88 pages)

*Born Giving Birth* celebrates a harvest of poetry and visual images from 40 Mennonite women of Canada and the United States. Many Mennonite women are engaged in renegotiating their places in the church community and family. As we see the rows of canned fruits on the shelf in the cellar and the designs of the quilts from our past, we realize there is a legacy of beauty and way of living that we need to sort through. How will we select what we want to preserve in our memories and lives? This rich collection of art shows how some women have been making their way.

Slowly savoring the lines of poetry and pausing with the art helped me to reflect on the heritage of women in my life. As we come to know these patterns in our mother's and grandmother's past, as we go through their attics, gardens, and cellars, we can more wisely and boldly step into the current world of ideas. This collection of poetry and art helps us to bring some things down from the attic, but it risks a few steps further. The works of Erma Martin capture this process. The colors, forms and functions of our past are there, but juxtaposed with contemporary lines and themes.

In *Born Giving Birth*, Mary H. Schertz and Phyllis Martens have provided the Mennonite Church with a timely gift. This creative art medium is as important and more enjoyable than some narratives on such topics on self-discovery, childhood, sexuality, the church and society, friendship, death, and theology.

These poems and pictures are in a lovely gift form. Each one needs to be savored with plenty of space and time. The book

can be given to your children and grandchildren just like the quilts and the flowers from our garden.

Read privately with journal or canvas at hand, the poetry will connect you to your own mothers and grandmothers. The poems also lend themselves for public use. They could be used in corporate worship services, conferences, assemblies and committee meetings. The art and poetry could also be used as discussion pieces for Sunday school classes and small groups. These images help us with the necessary changes from one generation of Canadian/American Anabaptist women to the next.

Reviewed by Ruth Detweiler Leshner, Lancaster, Pa.

#### Support Report!

We invite your financial support for *Report*. There is no mandatory subscription fee, but we do invite regular contributions toward printing and mailing costs, from those able to pay. We suggest \$10 yearly (\$5 for students and those on reduced incomes). Any contribution above \$10 is tax deductible. Checks should be made out to Mennonite Central Committee. Please return this response form with your contribution.

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Enclosed find a \$\_\_\_\_\_ contribution for  
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Concerns, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501.



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## News and Verbs

- **"In a Mennonite Voice: Women Doing Theology"** is the theme of a conference to be April 30-May 2 at Conrad Grebel College. This will be a forum for women and men interested in exploring the emerging theological voices of women. For information contact Chris Stickel at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, ON, N2L 3G6; telephone 519-885-0220, Ext. 223.
- ***Crossing the Boundary: Professional Sexual Abuse*** is the title of a new MCC packet. Professional abuse is the pattern of some who hold positions of power or status in our society—therapists, doctors, clergy, teachers, lawyers, etc.—using that power to sexually exploit those under

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committee on Women's Concerns. The committee, formed in 1973, believes that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committee strives to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures in which men and women can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committee on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Janice Wiebe Ollenburger. Correspondence and address changes should be sent to Kristina Mast Burnett, Women's Concerns, MCC, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

U.S. residents may send subscriptions to the above address. Canadian residents may send subscriptions to MCC Canada, 50 Kent Avenue, Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1. A donation of \$10 per year per subscription is suggested.

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their care or tutelage. The packet describes the pattern of professional abuse and discusses ways to prevent and address it. It was produced by Mennonite Conciliation Service, MCC U.S. Women's Concerns, and MCC Canada Women's Concerns. Available for \$5 each.

- **World Day of Prayer** will be March 6. The theme for this women's day of prayer will be "Living Wisely with Creation." Writers are women from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Materials cost \$4.50 from Church Women United Distribution Center, PO Box 346, Kutztown PA 19530, 212-870-2347; or Women's Inter-Church Council, 77 Charles St. W, Toronto, ON, M5S 1K5.
- Rachel Prance, MCC worker in Brazil, has written a paper on the anthropological perspective of **"Masculine-Feminine Relationships: In Search of Health."** This was presented at a meeting of the Brazil Nucleus of the Latin America Theological Fraternity in Campinas, San Paulo, Brazil.
- Julia Farquhar has been appointed to a half-time position with **Project Ploughshares** and a half-time position on the **Horn of Africa Project** at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel College.
- Sharon Britton Miller of Calgary, Alta., is **new columnist for the "faith page"** of the *Mennonite Reporter*.



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